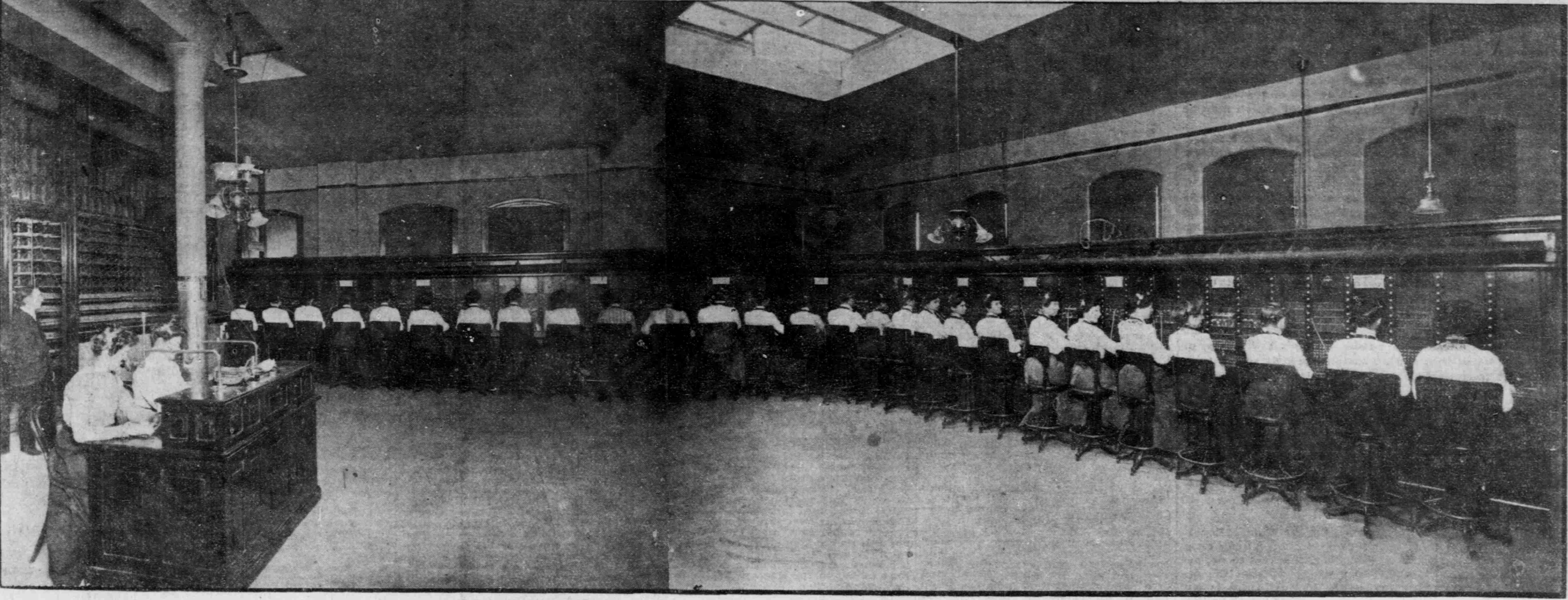


Here is the Telephone "Central's" Story



Read of her experiences and speak kindly to her in the future, for she has enough trying incidents in her work without you adding to her troubles.



Main Operating Room in Salt Lake Central Office of the Rocky Mountain Bell Telephone Company.

HERE are approximately 15,000 public and private telephones in Salt Lake City, and of that number more than 80 per cent are owned by the Rocky Mountain Bell Telephone company. To handle these 'phones successfully, a small army of expert operators and linemen is necessary, and it speaks well for the services rendered that the number of complaints from subscribers has been reduced to figures astonishingly small.

It was in connection largely with these complaints that a visit was made to the operating room of the company. It did not require more than a passing glance to learn that the place was a veritable hive of industry. Thirty-three young women were seated side by side before the great switchboard, each intent upon her work. There was no laughing, no chatting, no gossip, such as some subscribers have charged up to the account of the telephone girl, but on the contrary there was in evidence a concentrated effort on the part of everyone to comply with each request with as much alacrity and cheerfulness of spirit as it was possible for the human mind to conceive. There was a kind of suppressed murmur vibrating through the room, but even at a distance of two feet the words spoken into the transmitter at any one station were scarcely audible. There were slightly louder noises made by slipping the plugs into the sockets to make connections and an occasional rustle of skirts when some girl left her high chair, her "trick" of eight hours being over, and the corresponding swish of the gown of the "relief" or of the girl just going on duty.

Watchful and Waiting.
Three supervisors moved silently in slow measured steps from one end of the room to the other, keeping a careful outlook on the operators to see that they were attentive to their duties. At two central desks were the chief operator and assistants, watchful and waiting for any sudden call on them for information. At another desk sat a young woman with head receiver in position and a stop watch in her hand. There was a book in front of her and from time to time she made entries in the book. A glance at the opened page revealed the familiar twists and turns of the steno-graphic, to be transcribed later into typewriting for the benefit of the general manager, the city manager and the manager of the operating room. She was listening to conversations over the wires, and her duty was to take notes of any coarse language from subscribers or port remarks by the operators to irascible persons on the lines. It speaks well for the discipline of the operating room that she had spent the day thus far without having had occasion to report any of the young women for infractions of the rules.

Of course it is impossible to hold converse with any of the girls while they are on duty, and even after the day's labors are over they are somewhat shy about talking shop. It was only after sacred promises had been made that none of their names would be used, that any of the young women would consent to talk, but once started they furnished a fund of interesting details of incidents which occur with more or less frequency each day of their lives while perched on the high chairs in the operating room.

Children Cause Annoyance.
"Of course, sometimes central will ring on the wrong number, and when the caller is quite positive that some one is home to answer the 'phone, it is very annoying. I admit, to be told 'I can't get them.'"
"During my experience as a telephone operator I have found this to be one of the greatest difficulties, especially with children. They invariably don't understand what is meant. They call a number, and if you say you can't get it they hang up and in about two seconds call for the same number. This is kept up incessantly until sometimes one feels just angry enough to shake the life out of the child."

"I have heard people say that central just would not give them a number, possibly out of spite of something. This is not so, because we are requested to ring a number three times, and I do not think that a central girl gains anything by not ringing a number simply because she does not like a certain subscriber or has some ill-feeling toward him."

"Among the numerous trials that every operator has to meet with is that of convincing a subscriber that she cannot raise the party he has called. It is a rule for every girl to ring three times distinctly on a line, and then, if no one answers, report that she cannot get them. As a general thing we are then asked why we cannot get them."

"There are many reasons why, and yet when a man is anxious to talk

to some one he does not stop to think that perhaps the bell does not ring, or else maybe the party has just stepped out.

Often there is trouble on a line, which stops the bell from ringing, but more often when the trouble is tested we find that the party did not happen to be in.

It was in connection largely with these complaints that a number repeatedly on one occasion, and finally it was reported to the trouble department. The man who investigated the trouble found that the house was closed and that there was no one there to answer the 'phone.

School of Self Control.

"For my part," said another operator, whose cheeks were aglow from the frosty air, "one of the finest places to school your feelings and enforce self-control is a telephone office. It would indeed be a very pleasant occupation if we only had all gentlemen and ladies to deal with, but unfortunately, this is not the case. The other day a subscriber called for a number and after ringing them three times I reported I couldn't get them; but he persisted in saying that he knew his man was there. I rang three times again, but could get no response. He then asked if the line was busy and upon learning that it was not he poured forth such language in my ears as would hardly look well in print."

A girl with a philosophical turn of mind was the next one to relate her experiences.

"An operator's life," she said, "is made up of smiles, frowns and sometimes tears. She in turn answers the nice man, the pleasant man, and what we call the cross man. And, while it is said 'Variety is the spice of life,' it is sometimes cayenne pepper in ours, rather than spice."

The ordinary man will say: 'Central, give me 27.' The nice man will always say 'Please,' or speak in such a manner that it has the same effect or conveys the same meaning. They are never too busy to be polite to an operator and to treat every one with gentle consideration. This characteristic is noticeable among railroad employees. The brusque man usually says: 'I did register, and I want that number.' But it is very seldom you can deceive an operator, and although she is not allowed to dispute a subscriber's word, she nevertheless knows if he has turned the key or simply hit the instrument when called upon to register. There has been a decided change in this respect of late, however, and the operators are inclined to think the subscriber who has been out of the beginning of the year and are endeavoring to carry them out.

It is a common observation among the operators that a person's disposition is very much displayed at the 'phone; so much so, that the young women think the choice of a good husband could as easily be made in that way as by the ordinary method of introduction. This observation remains to be proven, however. Women patrons, as a rule, are more impatient and persistent than men, particularly if the number called for is busy."

Must Be Always Sweet Tempered.

Here is one of central's worst trials. She is supposed to ring a number three times only, but so often, when she informs the subscriber that she can't get them he will say: "Oh, ring them again, central. I know they are home." After being informed for the third or fourth time that she can't get them, he will slam up the receiver in no gentle mood. He evidently thinks central has nothing else to do but to ring for him. And then so many, when they are asked to register, will be sure to have had the wrong number before, or just lost their register key or some equally good excuse. Not long ago a young man asked central for a number, and when asked to register, said: "We can't register, central. We've lost our key." She told him that that was all right, but he "will have to find the key before he can have the connection." He said: "Oh! Well, I will." And the way in which he turned the key was a caution. And then again, so many forget to look up the number they want till after they have taken down the receiver. Central asks them several times for their number and on getting no response, leaves them while she waits on other more urgent ones.

"Yes, central must never lose her temper, but must be always sweet and gracious," said a pouting dame, who had been telling in an impersonal way her experiences in the foregoing facts. A girl whose manner indicated that she had arrived at the practical stage of her experience was the next one to join in the conversation, and with some asperity she said:

"Some people think and say: 'How cross and unaccommodating central is,' but do they stop to think of the number of times central has to say: 'Number, please?' 'I can't get them.' 'Did you get them?' etc., and that there is every dialect from Chinese baby talk to try to understand. She has on an average fifteen hundred calls to answer in an

eight-hour shift and cannot relieve the monotony by a word to the girl next to her. Is it any wonder her voice grows harsh? Then, too, there are the difficulties and time wasted in getting people's numbers, which the subscriber does not understand. For instance these examples:

Operator—Number, please.

Subscriber—3-2. "Hello there, Jones, how are you?" 7-8. "Come in and sit down?" 3. "How are all the folks?" (Central has pieced out 323-y, and tests the lines, and finds it busy.)

Operator—This line is busy.

Subscriber—When did you get in? (To visitor in subscriber's office.)

Operator—This line is busy.

Subscriber—How long are you going to stay? (Still to visitor.)

Operator—This line is busy.

Subscriber—Well, why didn't you tell me so before? (To operator.)

Here Is Another Sample.

Operator—Number, please?

Sub.—Tell my brother I missed this morning's train and will take the 6 o'clock train tonight.

Operator—What is your brother's number?

Sub.—He lives across the road from Green.

Operator—Where does Green live?

Sub.—Around the corner from the grocery store.

Operator—Is that in Salt Lake?

Sub.—No, in Salem, Utah. (The operator then gave him long distance.)

"The public seem to think central is to blame when a line is busy," the narrator continued, "and they want it. Some who call for a number the second time and find the line still busy, become exasperated. Instead of placing the receiver on the hook, they throw it at the telephone. Do they realize that central is not responsible for the people wanted being busy, and does the subscriber know the hang in the ear they give the operator by doing so? It makes her feel so cheerful to hear such unpleasant remarks as these: 'Is the line always busy?' 'Are they going to be busy all day?' 'I don't believe you look to see if it is busy.' 'I know who is talking. Switch me on the line.' (That would cost us \$2.)"

The Slow Moving Subscriber.

"When a subscriber takes down his receiver to call central he expects to be answered instantly. He doesn't seem to realize that central has other subscribers to answer and ring up. If you have a telephone in your office or store, call up central and wait on a customer. Take your time in answering your bell, or what is better, do not answer it at all just then, but in about half an hour call central and ask who is called you, and get mad if central, with \$800 subscribers, has forgotten who it was. She has nothing else to do, but remember, if the party you call does not answer but the blame on central; never speak kindly to the operator, as she is more used to being called names."

The abrupt girl, that is, abrupt and terse in speech, was the next to relieve her feelings with the following episode:

"In the course of calls one busy Sunday afternoon came the following: A light shows up and central plugs in with 'Number, please,' and subscriber says '—', giving number. Central repeats number, plugs on number called and rings. After the third ring the number called answers. In the meantime central has been answering numerous calls, when she notices the first-mentioned subscriber calling again, and on going in on the connection asks, 'Did you get them?' and is answered in this way: 'Central, I asked you for — hotel, and you gave me a private residence. What does this mean?' At which central replies that she rang the number asked for. (All this time she sees other lights coming in which means other subscribers are at their 'phones waiting to be answered.) The subscriber then thinks a number and gives you this answer: 'Oh, I beg your pardon, central, I asked for the wrong number. What I want is —'. After having rung the corrected number, central plugs in to answer another call, and is greeted with: 'Asleep, central?' or were you just out for a walk?' Of course, central must say nothing, as there is no one at home to leave him with."

What the Chief Operator Hears.

But while the girls off duty are exchanging reminiscences, the work in the operating room never ceases. There are fluctuations, of course, in the number of calls, varying according to the hour of the day. During the noon hour the number of calls received runs up in the thousands, while between 3 and 4 o'clock in the morning the number sometimes falls as low as seventeen within the hour.

It was during the busy hour yesterday, after the morning shift had been changed, that a visitor returned to the operating room and was received by the operating manager. In the course of conversation he said:

"The question sometimes arises, is a chief operator necessary in a telephone exchange, and if so, why? Just come with me into the exchange and listen on her desk for a few minutes and I think you can answer that question yourself. It is the chief operator's busy day, so we will just note some of the most interesting calls she has, some of which will appear really ridiculous to you."

"Chief operator?"

"Yes."

"How cold was it about midnight last night?"

"Chief operator, can you tell me if there is good skating, and, if so, where?"

(Information given.)

"Can you tell me what time the matinee begins, what the play is and if they will allow me to take my baby, as there is no one at home to leave him with?"

"Please tell me the fare from here to Ogden and how long it takes to get there."

"Here are some more of our friends who claim our attention while six or seven other parties are waiting, with such questions as: 'I would like the telephone number of a family living next door to Mr. — on Sixth East. Mr. — has no telephone and I don't know the other man's name, or I want a groceryman in the western part of town. I don't know his name or address, but he is the man who was held up during the summer time and had his store robbed.' 'I would like to talk to Mrs. B. that used to be. She has married again and I do not know her present husband's name or where they live.' 'Would like to know how to spell perceptively; do not know whether it is per or pre.' 'Can you tell me who is on the top floor of the Atlas?' 'Please

tell me how many feet it is from the base of the hill to the top of the flagpole at Fort Douglas.'"

"But give the chief operator a little of your sympathy when she has several calls a day as: 'I am going away, and will you tell the people who call that I will not be home for two hours,' and our friend is one on a four-party line. 'I have tried all morning to get 1553 Z. Can you tell me whether there is anyone home or not?' 'My husband is doing some work in Devon court, and could you find some one there who would call him to the telephone.'"

"All of these people ask for things that are so far beyond our reach. 'How

(Continued on page 7.)

DO WE COLLECT BAD BILLS?

Just Read This:

John R. Barnes, President.

George Romney, Vice-President.

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A. J. Barnes, Managers

Salt Lake City, Feb. 4, 1905

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settlement of that claim against a man who had been owing us for ten long years. We had exhausted all our own efforts and had tried other collectors, yet before we realized you had started we received the report of its collection by you.

The result is simply phenomenal, and we cannot express our appreciation too strongly. Within 24 hours after the debtor reported to us that he had paid you, your check was in our office.

That is what we call promptness. We thank you. We are well pleased with our Membership

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Your actions have plowed deep furrows in your mother's cheek. Time has scattered the snowy flakes on her hair, but those are the same lips which have kissed many a hot tear from your childish cheek. The sands of her life have nearly run out, but feeble as she is she will go further and reach down lower for you than any other person on earth.

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